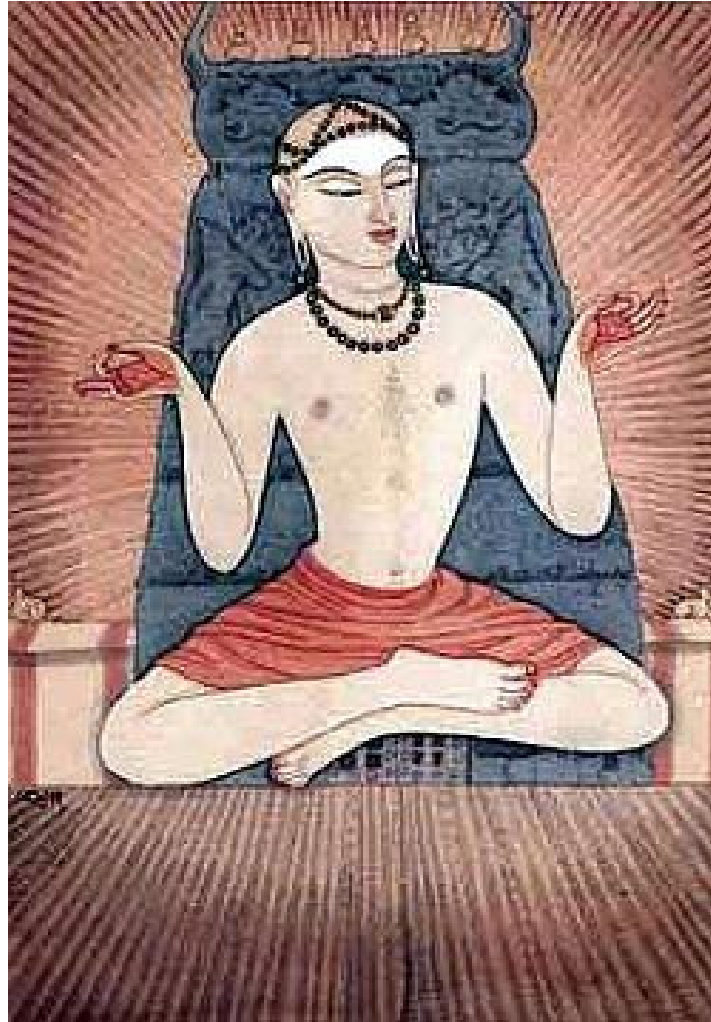
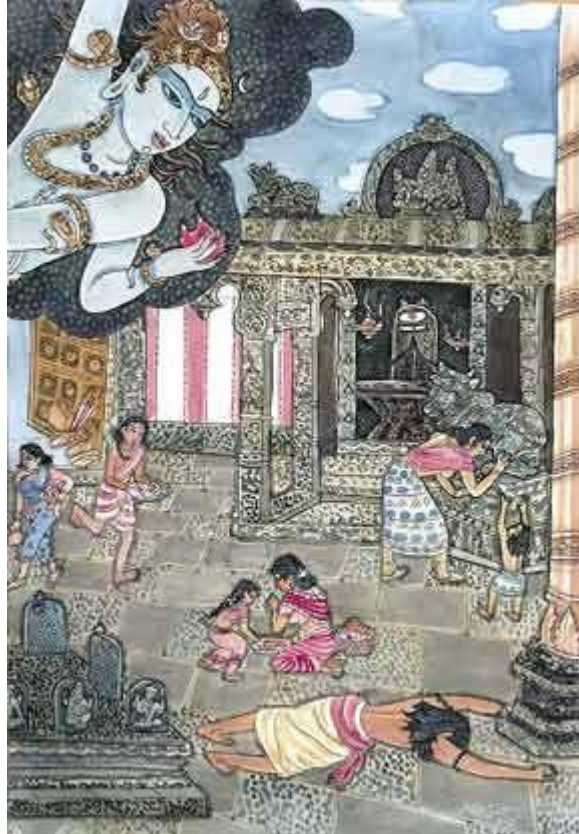


Agama Shastra and Temple worship

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The Hindu temples are complex institutions. They represent the culmination of social and religious aspirations of a society. Temple is the focal point in the life of a community and often represents its pride, identity and unity. It is also the index of the community's wellbeing. It draws into its fold people from its various segments and denominations; and binds them together. In smaller communities the temple apart from being a source of spiritual or religious comfort, also serves as center for education and recreation.



A temple is also a treasure house of art and architecture, designed according to the principle of Vaastu Shastra, characterized by their majesty, serenity and beauty of intricate sculpture and designs. A temple evokes in the visitor a sense of beauty in art and in life as well. It lifts up his spirit, elevates him to a higher plane dissolving his little ego. At the same time, it awakens him to his insignificance in the grand design of the Creator.

The most significant aspect of the temple worship is its collective character. Peoples' participation is both the purpose and the means of a temple. The community is either actually or symbolically involved in temple worship. The rituals that dominate temple worship are therefore socio- religious in character.

The worship in a temple has to satisfy the needs of individuals as also of the community. The worships that take place in the sanctum and within the temple premises are important; so are the festivals and occasional processions that involve direct participation of the entire community. They complement each

other. While the worship of the deity in the sanctum might be an individual's spiritual or religious need ; the festivals are the expression of a community's joy , exuberance , devotion , pride and are also an idiom of a community's cohesiveness .

The appointed priests carry out the worship in the temple on behalf of other devotees. It is hence *parartha*, a service conducted for the sake of others. Priests, generally, trained in ritual procedures, pursue the service at the temple as a profession. As someone remarked, "other people may view their work as worship, but for the priests worship is work." They are trained in the branch of the Agama of a particular persuasion. The texts employed in this regard describe the procedural details of temple worship, elaborately and precisely.



The term Agama primarily means tradition; Agama is also that which helps to understand things correctly and comprehensively. Agama Shastras are not part of the Vedas. The Agamas do not derive their authority directly from the

Vedas. They are Vedic in spirit and character and make use of Vedic mantras while performing the service.

The Agama shastras are based in the belief that the divinity can be approached in two ways. It can be viewed as nishkala, formless – absolute; or as sakala having specific aspects. Nishkala is all-pervasive and is neither explicit nor is it visible. It is analogues, as the Agama texts explain, to the oil in the sesame-seed, fire in the fuel, butter in milk, and scent in flower. It is in human as antaryamin, the inner guide. It has no form and is not apprehended by sense organs, which includes mind.

Sakala, on the other hand, is explicit energy like the fire that has emerged out of the fuel, oil extracted out of the seed, butter that floated to the surface after churning milk or like the fragrance that spreads and delights all. That energy can manifest itself in different forms and humans can approach those forms through appropriate means. The Agamas recognize that means as the archa, the worship methods unique to each form of energy-manifestation or divinity.

The Vedas do not discuss about venerating the icons; though the icons (prathima or prathika) were known to be in use. Their preoccupation was more with the nature, abstract divinities and not with their physical representations. The Vedas did however employ a number of symbols, such as the wheel, umbrella, spear, noose, foot-prints, lotus, goad and vehicles etc. These symbols, in the later ages, became a part of the vocabulary of the iconography.

The idea of multiple forms of divinity was in the Vedas .They spoke about thirty-three divinities classified into those of the earth, heaven and intermediate regions. Those comprised twelve adityas, aspects of energy and life; eleven rudras, aspects ferocious nature; eight vasus, the directional forces; in addition to the earth and the space.



The aspects of the thirty-three divinities were later condensed to three viz. Agni, the aspect of fire, energy and life on earth; Vayu, the aspect of space, movement and air in the mid-region; and Surya the universal energy and life that sustains and governs all existence, in the heavenly region, the space. This provided the basis for the evolution of the classic Indian trinity, the Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.

Rig Veda at many places talks in terms of saguna, the supreme divinity with attributes. The Vedanta ideals of the absolute, attribute- less and limit-less universal consciousness evolved as refinements of those Vedic concepts. The Upanishads are the pinnacles of idealism that oversee all horizons. But, in practice common people worshipped variety of gods in variety of ways for variety of reasons. They are relevant in the context of each ones idea of needs and aspirations; fears and hopes; safety and prosperity; and, the pleasures and pains.



One often hears Agama and Nigama mentioned in one breath as if one follows the other or that both are closely related.

However, Nigama stands for Vedas and Agama is identified with Tantra. The two traditions- Veda and Tantra – hold divergent views on matters such as God; relationship between man and God; the ways of worship; and path to salvation etc. The Vedic concept of God is omniscient, omnipotent, a formless absolute entity manifesting itself in phenomenal world of names and forms. The Agama which is a part of Tantra regards God as a personal deity with recognizable forms and attributes.

Vedic worship is centered on the fire (the *Yajna*), certain religious and domestic rituals, (*shruta sutraas and grihya sutraas*), and the sacraments, (*samskaara*). In this tradition, the gods and their descriptions are, mostly, symbolic. The hymns of the Rig Veda are the inspired outpourings of joy and revelations through sublime poetry. The Yajur and Sama Vedas do contain suggestions of sacrifices; but they too carry certain

esoteric symbolic meaning. Very few of these rituals are in common practice today.

The most widespread rituals of worship today are of the Aagamic variety. The Agama methods are worship of images of God through rituals (*Tantra*), symbolic charts (*Yantra*) and verbal symbols (*Mantra*). Agama regards devotion and complete submission to the deity as fundamental to pursuit of its aim; and hopes that wisdom, enlightenment (*jnana*) would follow, eventually, by the grace of the worshipped deity. The Agama is basically dualistic, seeking grace, mercy and love of the Supreme God represented by the personal deity, for liberation from earthly attachments (*moksha*).

As compared to Vedic rituals (*Yajnas*) which are collective in form, where a number of priests specialized in each discipline of the Sacrificial aspects participate; the Tantra or Agamic worship is individualistic in character. It views the rituals as a sort of direct communication between the worshipper and his or her personal deity. The Yajnas always take place in public places and are of congregational nature; and in which large numbers participate with gaiety and enthusiasm. A Tantra ritual, on the other hand, is always carried out in quiet privacy; self discipline and intensity is its hallmark, not exuberance or enthusiasm.

The culmination of these two dissimilar streams of worship is the temple worship. It could be argued that a representation of the Supreme Godhead is theoretically impossible; yet one has also to concede that an image helps in contemplation, visualization and concretization of ideas and aspirations. Here, at the temple, both the Vedic and the Tantric worships take place; but each in its sphere. A temple in Hindu tradition is a public place of worship; several sequences of worship are conducted in full view of the worshipping devotees; and another set of rituals are conducted by the priests in the privacy of the sanctum away from public gaze.

The temple worship is guided by its related Agama texts which invariably borrow the mantras from the Vedic traditions and the ritualistic details from Tantric traditions. This has the advantage of claiming impressive validity from Nigama, the Vedas; and at the same time, carrying out popular methods of worship.



For instance, the Bodhayana shesha sutra and Vishhnu-pratishtha kalpa outline certain rite for the installation of an image of Vishnu and for conduting other services. The Agama texts combined the rules of the Grihya sutras with the Tantric practices and formed their own set of rules.

While installing the image of the deity, the Grihya Sutras do not envisage *Prana-prathistapana* ritual (transferring life into the idol by breathing life into it); but the Agamas borrowed this practice from the Tantra school and combined it with the Vedic ceremony of "opening the eyes of the deity with a needle". While rendering worship to the deity the Agamas discarded the Tantric mantras; and instead adopted Vedic mantras even for services such as offering ceremonial bath , waving lights etc. though such practices were not a part of the Vedic mode of worship. The Agamas, predominantly, adopted the Vedic style Homas and Yajnas, which were conducted in open and in which a large number of people participated. But, the Agamas did not reject the Tantric rituals altogether; and some of them were conducted within the sanctum away from common view..

The Vaikhanasa Vasishnava archana vidhi, which perhaps was the earliest text of its kind, codified the of worship practices by judicious combination of Vedic and Tantric procedures. In addition, the worship routine was rendered more colorful and attractive by incorporating a number of ceremonial services (*upacharas*) and also presentations of music, dance, drama and other performing arts. It also brought in the *Janapada*, the popular celebrations like Uthsavas etc, These ensured larger participation of the enthusiastic devotees.

The Agamas tended to create their own texts. That gave rise to a new class of texts and rituals; and coincided with the emergence of the large temples. It is not therefore surprising that town-planning, civil constructions and the arts occupy the interest of early Agamas.

In due course the Agama came to be accepted as a subsidiary culture (*Vedanga*) within the Vedic framework.

Agamas are a set of ancient texts and are the guardians of tradition .They broadly deal with *jnana* (knowledge), *Yoga* (meditation), *Kriya* (rituals) and *Charya* (ways of worship).The third segment *Kriya* (rituals) articulate with precision the principles and practices of deity worship – the mantras, mandalas, mudras etc.; the mental disciplines required for the worship; the rules for constructing temples and sculpting the images. They also specify the conduct of other worship services, rites, rituals and festivals. The fourth one, *Charya*, deals with priestly conduct and other related aspects. [Incidentally, the Buddhist and the Jaina traditions too follow this four-fold classification; and with similar details]

The Texts hold the view that *Japa*, *homa*, *dhyana* and *Archa* are the four methods of approaching the divine; and of these, the *Archa* (worship) is the most comprehensive method. This is the faith on which the Agama shastra is based. The Agama shastra is basically concerned with the attitudes, procedure and rituals of deity worship in the temples. But it gets related to icons and temple structures rather circuitously. It says, if an image has to be worshipped, it has to be worship- worthy. The rituals and sequences of worship are relevant only in the context of an icon worthy of worship; and such icon has to be contained in a shrine. And an icon is meaningful only in the

context of a shrine that is worthy to house it. That is how the Agama literature makes its presence felt in the *Shilpa-Sastra*, Architecture. The icon and its form; the temple and its structure; and the rituals and their details, thus get interrelated. The basic idea is that a temple must be built for the icon, and not an icon got ready for the temples, for a temple is really only an outgrowth of the icon, an expanded image of the icon.



The Shipa Shatras of the Agamas describe the requirements of the temple site; building materials; dimensions, directions and orientations of the temple structures; the image and its specifications. The principal elements are *Sthala* (temple site); *Teertha* (Temple tank) and *Murthy* (the idol).

I am not sure about the historical development of the Agamas. However, I think, the most of the present-day Hindu rituals of worship seem to have developed after the establishment of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (*darshanas*). The

changes in religious rituals from the Vedic to the Aagamic seem consonant with the themes prevalent in the six orthodox systems. A very significant change is the integration of *Yoga* methodology into the rituals. Four of these eight stages are an integral part of all worship , namely, posture, (*aasana*), breath (life force)-control, (*praanaayaama*), placing or fixation, (*nyaasa* or *dhaaranaa*), and deep concentration and contemplation (*dhyaana*). . The temple architecture too follows the structure of the human body and the six chakras' as in yoga.

Surely the Agama tradition began to flourish after the 10th or the 11th century with the advent of the Bhakthi School.

There are three main divisions in Agama shastra, the Shaiva, the Shaktha and Vaishnava. The Shaiva branch of the Agama deals with the worship of the deity in the form of Shiva. This branch in turn has given rise to Shaiva Siddantha of the South and the Prathyabijnana School of Kashmir Shaivism. The Shaktha Agama prescribes the rules and tantric rituals for worship of Shakthi, Devi the divine mother. The third one, Vaishnava Agama adores God as Vishnu the protector. This branch has two major divisions Vaikhanasa and Pancharatra. The latter in turn has a sub branch called Tantra Sara followed mainly by the Dvaita sect (Madhwas).

Each Agama consists of four parts. The first part includes the philosophical and spiritual knowledge. The second part covers the yoga and the mental discipline. The third part specifies rules for the construction of temples and for sculpting and carving the figures of deities for worship in the temples. The fourth part of the Agamas includes rules pertaining to the observances of religious rites, rituals, and festivals.

Agama is essentially a tradition and Tantra is a technique; but both share the same ideology. But, Agama is wider in its scope; and contains aspects of theory, discussion and speculation.

The term Agama is used usually for the Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions and the Shaktha cult is termed as Tantric. But, there is an element of Tantra in Agama worship too, particularly in Pancharatra.

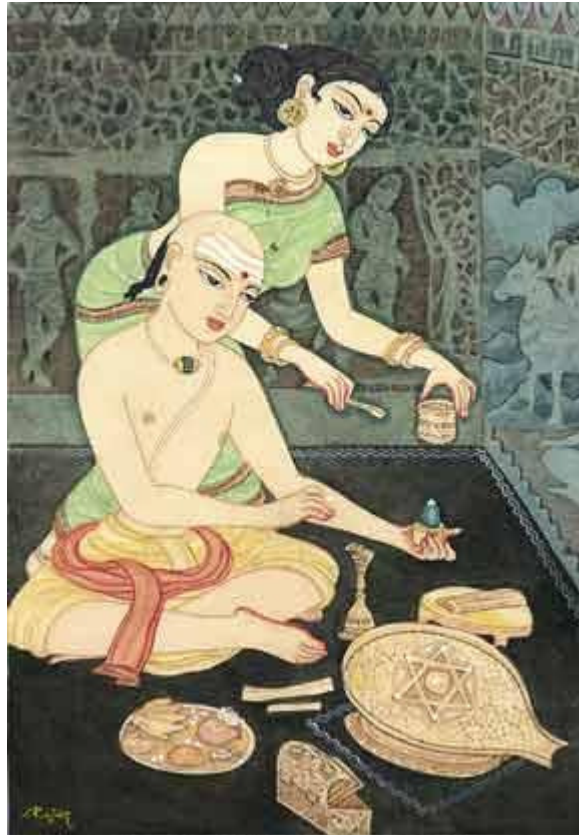
As regards Vaikhanasa, after the emergence of temple culture, Vaikhanasa appear to have been the first set of professional priests and they chose to affiliate to the Vedic tradition. That may perhaps be the reason they are referred to also as Vaidikagama or Sruthagama. Yet, there is no definite explanation for the term Vaikhanasa. Some say it ascribed to Sage Vaikhanasa who taught his four disciples: Atri, Bhrighu, Kasyapa, and Marichi ; while some others say it is related to vanaprastha, a community of forest-dwellers.

As regards their doctrine, Vaikhanasas claim to be a surviving school of Vedic ritual propagated by the sage Vaikhanasa. Most of Vaikhanasa is almost completely concerned with ritual, prescribing the rituals and their rules of performance of yaga, yajnas etc. To the Vaikhanasas, their temple worship is a continuation of Vedic fire sacrifice. The Vaikhanasa doctrine states that *moksha* is release into Vaikunta determined by the nature of a man's devotion and faith experienced mainly through *archana*, service to the deity.

The Vaikhanasa is regarded orthodox for yet another reason; they consider the life of the householder as the best among the four stages of life. Because, it is the householder that supports, sustains and carries forward the life and existence of the society. They treat the worship at home as more important than worship at the temple. A Vaikhanasa is therefore required to worship the deities at his home even in case he is employed as a priest at the temple. There is not much prominence for a Yati or a Sanyasi in this scheme of things. They decry a person seeking salvation for himself without discharging his duties, responsibilities and debts to his family, to his guru and to his society.

The Agama texts make a clear distinction between the worship carried out at his home (*atmartha*) and the worship carried out as priest at a temple (*parartha*) for which he gets paid. This distinction must have come into being with the proliferation of temples and with the advent of temple-worship-culture. It appears to have been a departure from the practice of worship at home, an act of devotion and duty. Rig Vedic culture was centered on home and worship at home.

The worship at home is regarded as motivated by desire for attainments and for spiritual benefits (*Sakshupa*). In the temple worship, on the other hand, the priest does not seek spiritual benefits in discharge of his duties (*nirakshupa*). He worships mainly for the fulfillment of the desires of those who pray at the temple. That, perhaps, appears to be the reason for insisting that a priest should worship at his home before taking up his temple duties.



Traditionally, a person who receives remuneration for worshipping a deity is not held in high esteem. The old texts sneer at a person “displaying icons to eke out a living.” That perhaps led to a sort of social prejudices and discriminations among the priestly class. But, with the change of times, with the social and economic pressures and with a dire need to earn a living, a distinct class of temple-priests, naturally, crystallized into a close knit in-group with its own ethos and attitudes. Whatever might be the past, one should recognize that temples are public places of worship; the priests are professionals trained and specialized in their discipline; and

they constitute an important and a legitimate dimension of the temple-culture. There is absolutely no justification in looking down upon their profession. Similarly, the Agamas , whatever is their persuasion, are now primarily concerned with worship in temples. And, their relevance or their preoccupation, in the past, with worship at home, has largely faded away.

From the end of the tenth century Vaikhanasa are prominently mentioned in South Indian inscriptions. Vaikhanasas were the priests of Vaishnava temples and were also the administrators.

However with the advent of Sri Ramanuja, who was also the first organizer of temple administration at Srirangam Temple, the Vaikhanasa system of worship lost its prominence and gave place to the more liberal Pancharatra system .Sri Ramanuja permitted participation of lower castes and ascetics , the Sanyasis (who were not placed highly in the Vaikhanasa scheme) in temple services. He also expanded the people participation in other areas too with the introduction of Uthsavas, celebrations, festivals, Prayers etc. This change spread to other Vaishnava temples particularly in Tamil Nadu. Vaikhanasas, however, continues to be important in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and in some temples of Tamil Nadu.

As regards Pancharatra, it appears to have been a later form of worship that gained prominence with the advent of Sri Ramanuja. Pancharatra claims its origin from Sriman Narayana himself.

Here *Vishnu* is worshipped as the Supreme Being conceived in five ways:

Para, or transcendent form;

Vyuha or the categorized form as *Vasudeva*, *Sankarshana*, *Pradyumna*, and *Aniruddha*, who are brought together in worship and adoration as a complete body of divine power; *Vaibhava*, or the several incarnation of God;

Archa, or the form of God worshipped in an image or an idol symbolizing the Universal entity; And, *Antaryamin*, or the indwelling immanent form of God as present throughout in creation.



The peak of *Vaishnava* devotion is in *Dashamaskanda*, the Tenth Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and in *Nalayira Prabhandam* the four thousand Tamil verses of the Vaishnava saints, the Alvars; and especially in the thousand songs known as *Tiruvaimozhi* of Nammalvar. The ecstasy of the *Gopi*-type of God - intoxicated-love is exhilarating and gives raise to divine intoxication in Nammalvar's poetic compositions.

Therefore, the Tamils verses and songs are prominent in Pancharatra worship. This method also employs more Tantras, Mandalas and Uthsavas which makes room for a large number of devotees of all segments of the society to participate. There are more *Jaanapada* (popular) methods of worship than mere Vedic performance of Yajnas. Even here, each prominent temple follows its favorite text. That is the reason there are some minor differences even among the Pancharatra temples.

As regards the differences between the two systems, one of the major differences is their view of the Supreme Being Vishnu.

The Vaikhanasas view Vishnu, the all-pervading supreme deity as Purusha, the principle of life; Sathya, the static aspect of deity; Atchuta, the immutable aspect; and Aniruddha, the irreducible aspect. Here the worshipper contemplates on the absolute form (*nishkala*) of Vishnu in the universe and as present in the worshippers body; and transfers that spirit into the immovable idol (*Dhruva Bheru*) and requests the Vishnu to accept worship. Vishnu is then worshipped as the most honored guest. Shri is important as nature, prakriti, and as the power, Shakti, of Vishnu.

The smaller movable images represent Vishnu's *Sakala* that is the manifest, divisible and emanated forms. The large immovable image representing Vishnu's *niskala* form, ritually placed in a sanctuary and elaborately consecrated; and the smaller movable images representing Vishnu's *sakala* form are treated differently.

The Pancharatra too regards Vishnu as the Supreme Being (*Para*). In his manifest form (*Vyuha*) he is regarded as Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, representing Krishna, his elder brother, his son and his grandson, respectively, who are brought together in worship and adoration as a complete body of divine power.

It is explained that Vasudeva, the Supreme Brahman, out of compassion, voluntarily assumed the bodily forms so that the devotees may have easy access to his subtle form. The approach to the divine is again graded. The devotee worships the *Vibhava* form; or the incarnation of God, on several occasions such as Rama , etc and moves on to worship the *Vyuha* forms. And , from *Vyuha* form he progresses to worship the subtle forms of Vasudeva.

Among the other differences between Vaikhanasa and Pancharatra, the latter say, they gain eligibility to worship (*Diksha*) after the ceremonial *Chkrankana*, which is imprinting the symbols of Vishnu on their body. Vaikhanasa see no need for such a ritual. The pregnant mother is given a cup of *Payasam* with the Vishnu seal in the cup. They recognize as worthy only such *Garbha_Vaishnavas*.

Vaikhanasa follow the lunar calendar while the Pancharatra follow the solar calendar.

Vaikhanasa consider Vishnu_Vishvaksena_Brighu as the *guru-parampara*; while Pancharatra consider Vishnu_Vishvaksena_Satagopa_Nathamuni_Yamuna_Ramanuja as the *guru-parampara*.

Vaikhanasa think it is enough if the daily worship is performed once in a day or, if needed be, stretched to six times in a day (*shat kala puja*). Pancharatra do not place any limit. If needed the service could be even 12 times a day, they say.

The other differences are that Vaikhanasa worship is considered more Vedic, the mantras being Sanskrit based and there is a greater emphasis on details of worship rituals and yajnas. Even here, the householders and celibates get priority in worshipping the deity. They consider *Griha-archana* the worship at home as more important than the congregational worship. The Sanyasis or ascetics have no place in this system.

Whereas in Pancharatra, there is greater emphasis of idol worship than on yajnas; and more Tamil hymns are recited and there is greater scope for festivals, celebrations and processions where all sections of the society including ascetics can participate.

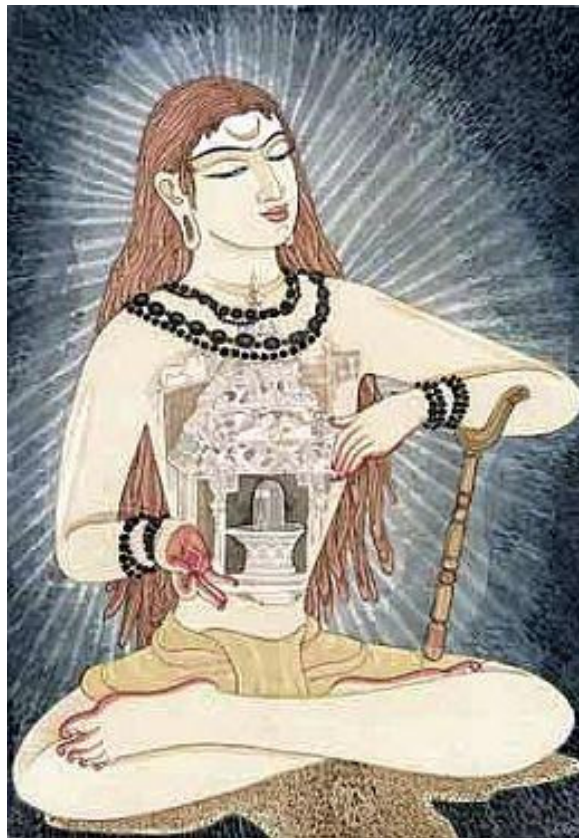
What is more important than the rituals is the symbolism that acts as the guiding spirit for conduct of rituals. At a certain level, symbolism takes precedence over procedures.

I think, ultimately, there is not much difference between Pancharatra and Vaikhanasa traditions. Both are equally well accepted. The differences, whatever might be, are not significant to a devotee who visits the temple just to worship the deity and to submit himself to the divine grace.

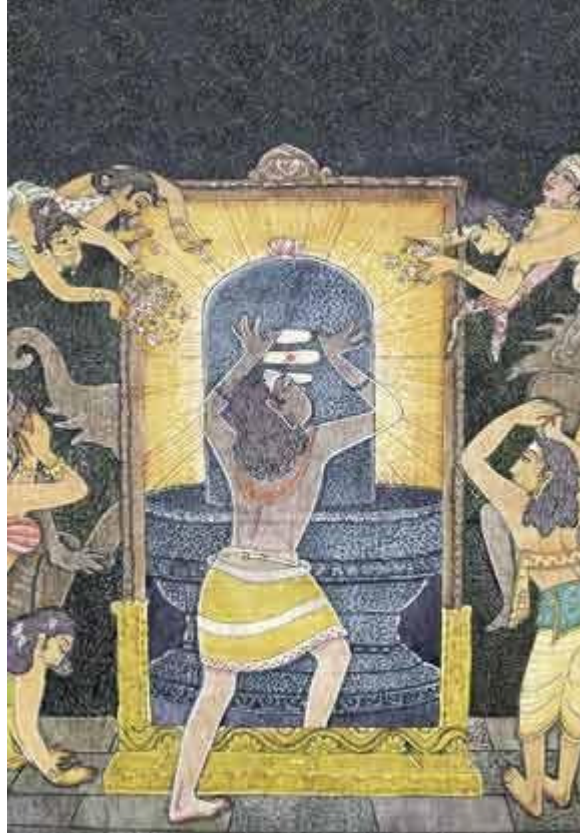
The *Shaiva Agama* worship is less formal than the *Vaishnava*, less restrained and less accustomed to social forms of regulations. *Siva* is the Supreme God of the *Shaiva* system, who is *Pati*, or Lord over all creatures, the latter being *Pashu*,

meaning animal or of beastly nature. The *Jiva* or the individual is caught in the snare of world-existence and attachment to objects. The grace of God, alone, is the means of liberation for the individual.

The worship of *Shaiva* is graded in steps: *Charya*, or the external service rendered by the devotee, such as collecting flowers for worship in the temple, ringing the bell, cleaning the premises of the shrine, and the like; *Kriya*, or the internal service, such as actual worship as well as its preparations; *Yoga*, or seeking identity with Shiva; and *Jnana*, or wisdom, in which the Shiva and the seeker are one. In Southern Shaivism the great Shaiva saints *Appar*, *Sundarar*, *Jnanasambandar* and *Manikyavachagar*, are said to represent, respectively, these four approaches to Shiva.



Kashmir Shaivism is a world by it self. Similar is the *Shakta* Agama, the *Tantra* worship of *Shakti*, the Divine Mother. These subjects deserve to be discussed separately.



Reference:

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